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ABSTRACT

Conflict is the basis of all stories and thus should appear in some form in the first sentence. There are three kinds of conflict: people vs. people; people vs. nature; and people vs. themselves. Conflict must be repeated in all the various elements of the story's structure, including the plot, which is the plan of action telling what happens to the characters in a story and having a beginning, a middle, and an end; the title, which should reflect in some way the main idea of the story; and the mood, which is the tone and feeling of atmosphere in a story. Characters should express and carry forward the conflict of the story, and their dialogue should be clear and reflect and repeat the conflict. Revision is one of the most important and challenging aspects of creative writing. (This pamphlet concludes with a selected bibliography of books to read for examples of conflict.) (TS)

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INCLUDING CONFLICT IN CREATIVE WRITING

by

MARTIN LEVIN
Author, Photographer, Editor

GALESBURG, ILLINOIS
1975

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AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

Martin Litvin was born and raised in Galesburg, Illinois. He graduated from Galesburg High School with the Class of 1945. He attended the University of Southern California and received a B.A. in Social Studies, graduating with the Class of 1949. He served with the United States Army in Great Britain and then attended the University of Iowa Law School. During his school years, Mr. Litvin wrote for a series of high school radio programs and local newspapers. Carl Sandburg in 1953 met and encouraged the author who attended law school at the University of Iowa before departing for New York City and a career as a professional writer. In New York, he wrote professionally in the fields of advertising, journalism, and Wall Street. Probably best known for his 1968 discovery of the lost Papers of Mother Bickerdyke, the famed Civil War nurse, Mr. Litvin's 1973 novel *Black Angel* brought him new recognition in the field of fiction and research. His 1971 book *Sergeant Allen and Private Renick* is now out of print and a collector's item. His 1972 *Voices of the Prairie Land* in two volumes is a reference item. His latest novel is *Hiram Revels in Illinois*, which appeared in 1974. The material set forth in *Including Conflict in Creative Writing* was tested by the author in a 1973-74 public school and college tour, which took him into the classrooms of more than a hundred educational institutions, where he worked with teachers and pupils.

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For Language Arts teachers,
Librarians,
Learning Center Directors
and students Jr. High thru College.

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Author, biographer, editor

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One important element in Creative Writing is something called *Conflict*. It is often overlooked in ordinary classroom procedures, and the person trying to write a story is frequently troubled by uncertainty. Will the construction be right the first time through? Perhaps. More likely, the initial draft will show the construction of the story as distorted, for the various elements do not always fuse smoothly. An author may not always see his idea fully and he may not always like his idea after it appears in his head. It could even be added the proper and thorough construction of a story amounts to a considerable test of the writer's personal character and it is within understanding to say that an author may turn to creative writing because his personal character is being disturbed in some way. But on these points, let the author have his privacy.

Yet none of these possible concerns matter here; instead, we are intent upon reminding all who seek to create fiction in the classroom and elsewhere, that *Conflict* is of greatest moment and should be included.

Therefore, it should also be said that this modest pamphlet does not seek to supersede whatever discipline that language arts instructors impose upon their students or even upon themselves; it aims only to supplement. Teachers, and students, it ought to also be said, are very well informed nowadays. I have been impressed by some educators who have drilled their students finely on many peripheral aspects of writing and publishing. In one place, for example, many knowledgeable comments from *fourth graders* were heard about copyrights, publishers and their editors, rejection slips, even how to wrap a manuscript for mailing. It would have been much more sensible and relative, however, if those boys and girls knew about *conflict*, what it is and how it works, than to have been so well tuned to the other, really trivial information.

This item contains no mention of what a chapter is, how long it should be, where it commences and so on. Nothing is said about inspiration, operative irony, caricature, or how to write a character sketch. For those who wish to possess such knowledge, let them go to school.

I may also say here that a writer need not be "brilliant," or display some characteristics that might give evidence of "Genius." But the person should be willing to work and prepared to think frankly. A puzzle, for example, can be a big challenge. Sometimes, long hours and days of patient trying are required, to fit the pieces together. The same holds true of a story. The more an author feels for his story and understands it, the greater will be his attachment to the work in trying to accomplish it.

An author should enjoy language, be something of a reader and like stories and books. An author should be well drilled in spelling, the proper use of English, and punctuation. Typing can be helpful, as can solitude and privacy.

Yet the work must be completed. Even if an author gets far along with a story and realizes that it is poor, he is better off attaining the end of the job and getting it out of his system. He can rest, seek diversion, and later try some new story idea. The second time, he may get it better than the first. If the second try fails, he can finish and go to the third. Each new story—started, worked through and completed—will teach that author something. How much and how well are up to him.

But the writer should be aware of Conflict and the important, basic role it plays. The writer should be reminded of a few places he can employ that durable element to advantage, and by keeping this pamphlet handy, perhaps he will be.

M.L.

Galesburg, Illinois
February 18, 1975

CONFLICT

Conflict is the basis of a story, and should appear in the very first sentence, in some way. In case a pupil or an author is uncertain about the meaning of the word, a dictionary should be consulted. Check the word's meaning and make a list of the definitions given, find their synonyms and check those definitions, too. If a class is involved, have a discussion. Personal conflict should be examined and identified, regardless of how little or great. An author should decide what he wants to use from his own life and work it into his story.

For class discussion in identifying conflict, make a list of well-known children's fairy tales and find the conflict in them.

Checklist of children's stories with conflict:

1. *The Three Bears*
2. *The Three Pigs*
3. *Cinderella*
4. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*
5. *Jack and the Beanstalk*

From grade school to *college level*, these stories are good illustrations and easily used in class discussions.

Conflict must be repeated in all the various elements of the story's structure. Students as well as authors should remember there are 3 kinds of conflict.

(a) Man vs. Man (mankind, womankind, etc.)
(b) Man vs. Nature (the weather, animals, the jungle, outer space, etc.)
(c) Man vs. Himself.

One reason why so many English teachers and students have taken to *Black Angel* is because the conflict is laid out clearly in the beginning and continues to the very end.

PLOT

It is the plan of action which tells what happens to the characters in a story. The story's central conflict should be expressed through this aspect of the overall design.

TITLE

It should hint or reflect in some manner the main idea of the story. A title need not be invented by the author until after the story is written, though sometimes writers think of their titles first.

MOOD

The *tone* and feeling of *atmosphere* in a story is mood; in a mystery story, for example, an author could lay down a mood of fear or horror by adding certain phrases or words at the beginning which might induce in the reader a sense of terror or fright. The so-called "gothic" novels can be examined profitably, when seeking examples of mood. But there are other genres that offer something to people wanting to find mood. Perhaps the plays of Eugene O'Neill could be cited here, especially his *Long Day's Journey into Night.*

Conflict is a part of mood. The author should take the conflict of his idea and story and characterize it and place it in appropriate early locations, using words that convey the particular feeling he has in mind, then continue throughout the story with scattered examples of this mood, until the effect builds and suggests *the feeling* wanted.

CHARACTERS

Characters are the people in the story, not necessarily always human. Frequently, they are animals or inanimate objects, but in any case, are those creatures with whom the story deals. They should express and carry forward the conflict laid down by the author at the start of his effort. Characters should be clearly described and the author had better be clear in his personal thinking as to these characters and their purpose, what he thinks of them and what they think of themselves.

DIALOGUE

This is what the characters say to one another and is *very important*. Dialogue should be clear and sharp and reflect and repeat the conflict of the overall story.

BEGINNING, MIDDLE AND END

The author should, if possible, get a beginning and an ending *in mind* and noted down on paper, *before* writing his story. The middle will emerge once the author knows the limit of his idea.

REVISION

This is a most important and challenging aspect of creative writing. An author should be prepared to rewrite, correct, alter, fix and smooth out again and again what he has written, if he has any belief in his product. Sometimes, a writer will turn out a manuscript from start to finish that he recognizes is poor. With that recognition, he should go on to another one and try to do better. People can do better if they will only work, and this is true especially in the production of written material. Sometimes, a writer will turn out a manuscript from start to finish that he recognizes is good and will be better with some revision. This precious item he should let rest a while and he should let himself rest a while, too. After a time, he can go back and do what is needed without butchering something that is good.

WRITING TRUTHFULLY

In any *creative* writing, there is naturally going to be some invention by the author. This is often what authors enjoy most in their writing and some do it very well. For them, writing the precise truth is quite difficult, for it may be unattractive or unbearably hard to recite. It is this way with most people, whether or not they are writers. The difference is that a writer attempts

to reduce his compromises with life to written words on paper. Is non fiction entirely true? That is moot, but some could say that non fiction is only an approximation of the truth. Fiction is also an approximation of the truth with some added touches by the author which he admits were added by him. Has anyone ever written the entire, complete truth? Has anyone ever told the entire, complete truth?

So we have fiction, which allows some truth to be told and some material to be added that is not necessarily true but could be.

An author's truthful-as-possible fiction should reflect the conflict of his story and it should be believable. The more effectively this is done, the more devastating will be the impact of what he has written. *Try.* See what you can do with what you have to work with. You might be surprised at how compelling the final effect will be.

CHECKLIST OF FICTION TO READ FOR CONFLICT

Great Expectations, Charles Dickens
Smoke, Ivan Turgenev
Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison
Hard Times, Charles Dickens
Tender is the Night, F. Scott Fitzgerald (revised edition only)
The Old Bunch, Meyer Levin
Native Son, Richard Wright
An American Tragedy, Theodore Dreiser
Citizens, Meyer Levin
War and Peace, Leo Tolstoy
Grub Street, George Gissing
Fathers and Sons, Ivan Turgenev
The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald
Look Homeward, Angel, Thomas Wolfe
And Quiet Flows the Don, Mikhail Sholokhov
Poor White, Sherwood Anderson
Our Mutual Friend, Charles Dickens
The Sun Also Rises, Ernest Hemingway
Sister Carrie, Theodore Dreiser
USA, John Dos Passos
Tom Jones, Henry Fielding
Giants in the Earth, Selma Rolvaag
Kristin Lavransdotter, Sigrid Undset
My Antonia, Willa Cather
Appointment in Samarra, John O'Hara
Go Tell it on the Mountain, James Baldwin
Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, James Joyce
Cry, the Beloved Country, Alan Paton
Grapes of Wrath, John Steinbeck
Three Soldiers, John Dos Passos
Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain

CONCLUSION

It may be reasonably argued that a writer produces his work for readers and in order to reach those readers, the work must be published. Every writer dreams of fame and riches at some point in his fantasies. But there is a long and painful, very difficult road to be travelled before a writer "gets there."

It is crucial that a writer accept the idea that the attainment of quality in writing takes work: brutal, elongated, enervating, thankless, grinding, hard work. After finishing a manuscript, the author may be so exhausted that he does not know what he has written, or if he likes it. Often, a writer will hand his manuscript to someone to read, to determine if they like it. Frequently, the writer will give his manuscript to a reader, hoping to learn from that person the identity of what he has written. And so on.

After years of experience, it is my belief that an author should show his manuscript to no one, until a little time and rest have elapsed. The author should try to avoid dependence upon whether someone else likes it. Someone else may only prove to be a powerful deception and unintentionally. Someone else might be a person of undeniable influence and public stature who at the same time has the intellectual taste and understanding of a low-grade moron. Why should the writer subordinate himself in such a perilous situation? What then?

Comments are often heard in the media from writers that "my agent liked it," or "my editor liked it." From this, a struggling author at home thinks that in order to succeed, he must therefore come up with something that an agent will like or an editor will like. People ought to realize that an agent will like anything he can sell because he wants to make a living. An editor will like anything the publisher tells him to like, because the publisher pays the editor to do his job. Editors and agents are not literary

geniuses because if they were, they would be writing and producing great works of art. Editors and agents, like teachers, are only human beings attempting to keep alive comfortably, which is very sensible. It puts on these individuals a terrible, almost crushing responsibility when authors seek their opinions as to whether their work is any good. Spare them the horror of daily mail deliveries jammed with manuscript parcels, whose contents have to be duly opened, examined, rejected and mailed back.

Rather, dear author, learn yourself what you have to offer, work with it, until it becomes alive and filled with passion; fight for it and fight with it. Remember, also, this can go on year after year and you will not earn five cents as a result. You still want to write? This will be the test of your intellectual toughness and settle decisively which way you are going to proceed in this world.

Many years ago in New York, one of the world's truly great novelists took a manuscript from me. Some days later, I was again in his workroom and this is what he said, *all he said*: "Oh, I read your thing. I have a rule never to comment on anyone else's unpublished fiction. Remember that in a story you should try to build to an effect."

At the time, I was greatly dismayed to have heard what seemed to be so little. Now it seems a great blessing that my friend did not load me up with many of his views because it would have inhibited the development of my own.

Creative writing is organic, or should be, and if something is deficient in execution, it very often is due to not having been deeply enough imagined by the author. More work! More conflict. It is awful. On all sides, the author is beset by a challenging host of fears and miseries. What is the answer? The author has to face them down —every last one—and keep on trying. Good luck!

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